

## Philosophy, Tragedy, and Education

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## **Philosophy, Tragedy and Education: Thinking After Nihilism**

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**Abstract** *This paper proposes a reclaiming of tragedy—in the sense implicit in Nietzsche’s first book Birth of Tragedy (1872/1956)—as a mode of thinking that offers a philosophical attitude in tune with deconstruction. Deconstruction in the sense used here signifies a mode of thinking which both acknowledges its debt to the philosophical heritage yet seeks to problematize both debt and heritage. Deconstruction aligned with tragedy offers ways of thinking that enable us to confront the challenge of nihilism, in all its guises, without having to reach for ready to hand ontotheological principles: principles such as those informing almost all contemporary educational research and which certainly govern the dominant modes of philosophy of education. The proper challenge of nihilism, then, this paper claims—understood as the proper challenge of philosophy and thinking—is yet to be met by the philosophy of education. Its recent celebrations of its own very limited rationalist heritage confirm this. Rethinking education in terms of its ontotheological status the paper claims is possible through the confrontation with nihilism.*

**Keywords** Tragedy, deconstruction, education, biopower, nihilism, ontotheology

### **A Primordial Nothing**

In *What is Metaphysics?* Heidegger identifies anxiety-toward-death as a fundamental element of *dasein*’s condition of existence. This mood of anxiety is closely related to a lurking, primordial and persistent nothing. This nothing, however, turns out to be more than “a mere nothing.” All concern, all care and all forms of activity are driven by this very nothing. It seems especially germane, then, to confront the nothing in contemporary educational discourses where it is habitually and necessarily foreclosed (Heidegger, 1993b).

One approach to the nothing is captured in Heidegger’s claim of an “end of metaphysics.” This end doesn’t mean all philosophical questions and issues have been resolved, but rather that philosophy has run out of steam, that the project of philosophy meant to determine “the Being of beings” was always doomed, in a sense, to come to this end (Heidegger, 1993a). But Heidegger suggests that the end

of philosophy, signified by the passing of “the last metaphysician,” Nietzsche, may represent the inauguration of *thinking* (Heidegger, 1993c). To put this all too crudely and simply, Heidegger is proposing that the ontotheological mission philosophy set itself soon after its inauguration achieves fulfilment in the effective realisation of its own impossibility. This negativity is, again, not a “mere nothing” but leads onto a new possibility—clearing the way for what we can tentatively call “thinking.” What, to cut a rather long story short, we can tentatively identify with “deconstruction” as a “way of thinking” that sifts through the debris of western metaphysics, that eschews the ontotheological, that begins, in all modesty, to try to reconstruct ways of thinking not imprisoned by the grand, ontotheological projects of philosophy but that recognizes our thinking must be always already freighted with a metaphysical inheritance (Derrida, 1978).

Heidegger’s claim that the end of philosophy may in effect mean the birth of thinking can be seen, then, as a prelude to the possibility of deconstruction. Another way of looking at the possibility of the end of philosophy and the birth of thinking is to consider *The Birth of Tragedy* as a prelude to deconstruction in the opposition it proclaims between “the spirit of tragedy” and the ethic of Platonic philosophy (Nietzsche, 1956). Tragedy here is to be understood not merely or simply as a form of dramatic practice but as a way of thinking that eschews any appeal to an overriding principle of reason, any recourse to a ready-to-hand rationality or any appeal to a secure grasp of the Being of beings. The lessons of tragedy for the contemporary and ontotheological condition of education and educational philosophy can only briefly be sketched but are nonetheless both powerful and shattering. Tragedy, in Nietzsche’s extended sense at least, offers meaningful encounters with “the nothing,” encounters beyond the thinking of modern and contemporary education and which are systematically foreclosed in the classic legacy of philosophy of education. This “beyond” serves to indicate the restricted idea of philosophy that has dominated this field.

### **A Disturbance in Philosophy**

For the sake of argument, and provisionally, I will propose that philosophy “itself” undergoes a kind of “queering”—an estrangement from its “proper” self—in relatively recent history from, say, 1872, which is the date of the publication of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. This “moment” is necessarily provisional. No doubt many other moments and events will have contributed to the change in orientation that I will claim is marked by Nietzsche’s first book. And in any case, the precise date or moment of its publication will not have given rise to a sudden shift in thinking or an instant swerve in the direction of philosophy. In fact, in order partly to problematize any suggestion in my account of a sudden and instantly transformative event, I will refer to the transformation initiated by Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* as belonging to the order of deconstruction.

Deconstruction itself is a tricky term that we must revisit constantly to catch the various echoes of its many possible meanings. This does not mean, of course, that it is without determinate meaning, or without value as a term designating a significant movement in thought. It does mean that there is not a single authoritative source for its strict interpretation. Trawling through the work and various statements of the putative author of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, doesn't help to finally stabilize its range of meanings into crystalline clarity. It does help, I believe, to give an expanded sense of the orientation referred to by the word. Definitions and handy formulae cannot substitute for Derrida's extensive and rigorous re-reading of and critique of western metaphysics. In that sense though what deconstruction is can be productively described in terms of enabling processes of rethinking, redefinition, or "queering." Although we cannot be sure exactly (or even confidently) what it is, deconstruction offers us a range of strategies and examples for interrogating the conceptual apparatuses that dominate our thinking and that set the ontological horizon for our being (Derrida, 1976; 1978). What's more, it is my contention that deconstruction exemplifies a shift in the orientation of philosophy in its attempt to engage with its own legacy and its possibilities for continuing as a meaningful practice.

Provisionally, we could say that deconstruction is exemplified, although not uniquely, by Derrida as a kind of re-reading (Derrida, 1987; Malabou, 2015). The notion of reading here seems useful. Most of Derrida's work in philosophy consists of returning to key authors and texts in the history of philosophy—as well as in the history of thought more generally—in order to look again at the conceptual structures that enfold their thinking as well as some of the specific formulations that organized their various accounts of how things are. Deconstruction is a kind of re-reading that gives close attention to the precise formulations that come down to us in the established works—the archive—of what is often reckoned to be "our" intellectual heritage.

Derrida has written about this process of archive and reception, reading and re-reading, reminding us of some of the very fundamental features of the processes involved in actively making sense of a legacy (Derrida, 1996). To paraphrase all too briefly, we find ourselves "thrown" arbitrarily into the world, confronted with an assemblage of texts, a symbolic inheritance that is also at the same time a kind of spectral debris, the left-over bits and pieces of various "pasts" that bear various relations to our own specific present. Such texts may be protected by "the archons," those who are authorized to safeguard, to preserve and to protect from corrosive or improper influences which might endanger authorized versions. Deconstruction mines (or re-mines) the existing archive and produces something *kind of* new out of the relatively solidified materials it confronts (Derrida, 1996; Foucault, 1977; Malabou, 2015).

Giving careful attention to the language of ideas, deconstruction reminds us that language and ideas are not separable. There is no “ordinary” language that is without metaphysics. Deconstruction affirms that even the most mundane, everyday kind of language is freighted with metaphysics (Derrida, 1978). Deconstruction also, in an interesting reversal, finds that the language of metaphysics—the language that explicitly declares itself to be the very language of reason—in turn is not free from the contaminations of everyday language, the inexplicit assumptions, the ambiguities, slippages, contradictions, unintended associations and non-sequiturs that beset all linguistic practice, in fact. Deconstruction rejects the very idea of a language of pure correspondences. Deconstruction introduces a range of terms that define those inescapable aspects of language that undermine any common-sense assumptions that there could be an uncontaminated, clear language of reason.

Deconstruction affirms a law of contamination and is adept at finding the strange torsions in the logic of language, especially in the language of reason. Deconstruction, though, does not decry reason: it’s actually made from it; but makes us rethink the nature and conditions of such reason that we might attain and aspire to. To the essential categories of philosophy (ontology, epistemology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethics) deconstruction adds “the aporetic.” Deconstruction has “negative capability”: everything that is knotty, intractable and irresolvable potentially gets foregrounded, including the necessary dimension of “madness” in reason. Derrida’s incontrovertible account of the decision, for instance, reveals the kernel of undecidability in all the operations of reason where decisions—however weighed, however meticulously considered—get made. At the same time deconstruction is—interminably, remorselessly, intricately and voluminously—dedicated to the pursuit of reason and to the articulation of its conditions of possibility (Derrida, 1999). It simply will not let things lie. Its remorseless pursuit of reason applies reason to reveal reason’s very own aporia.

Deconstruction gives access to the intricacies and complexities of ontology through its semi-droll sister invention, “hauntology” (Derrida, 1994). In giving emphasis to the inextricable complicity between presence and absence, Derrida’s hauntology insists on the dimension of the spectral. Spectrality foregrounds the absence that attends all presence and implies thereby the prevalence of mourning as a necessary element of the ontic and ontological. Derived from Derrida’s earlier, extensive series of concepts and arguments arising from the deconstruction of being as presence—supplement, trace, differance, dissemination, for example—hauntology invites us to consider the spectrality that constantly disturbs the idea of a stable, determinate relation between the present and the absent, between the present and the past, between the intelligible and the sensible. The spectre is never itself but is always the return of something else, something previous; and at the same time “the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as

that which could come, or come back” (Derrida, 1994, p. 11). Past, future and “present” are caught in an intricate dance where it becomes difficult to stabilize a secure temporal order, impossible to secure a pure presence for anything. Deconstruction was always quick to problematize ontology by revealing the aporetic connivance of presence with absence. Like tragedy, deconstruction, foregrounds this dimension and credits time with immeasurable ontological significance. The nothing is always lurking in attendance on the something.

### **What is Tragedy?**

Tragedy is fundamentally spectral. Its psychotropic modality conjures souls from the nether world. Tragedy expresses the difficulty of separating the living from the dead, expresses the essential relation between living and death: again, just as deconstruction expresses the impossibility of separating the present from the absent. Antigone is both living and dead and dwells in both domains. The spectral features of tragedy suggest a strong relation with deconstruction: staging of the relations between the living and the dead—the most radical instance of the deconstruction of presence and absence, perhaps—is essential to the “spirit of tragedy” (Derrida, 1978). The dead do not rest in tragedy; the dead remain, spectrally, and act upon the living: they constitute the appearance of the past in the present, breathing spectral life into the symbolic order, giving it shape and investing it with powerful significances. The presence of the dead heightens the symbolic in general and invests it with the moral authority of mourning. Tragedy constantly reminds us of this essential relation between the realm of meaning and death, between the Imaginary order, the Symbolic order and the order of the Real (Lacan, 2006).

The dimension of the spectral in Attic tragedy frequently and strangely asks you to identify with the Other (including the other who is dead and returns as ghost under the levelling effect of death). The ghost of Darius the Great in Aeschylus’s *The Persians* (the first known tragedy) appears before the Greek audience, transgressing both the border between living and dead but also suggesting that the borders of identity may be negated in the realm of the spectral where all suffering claims attention, where all are equivalent in and through suffering, loss and mourning. Spectrality, haunting, mourning and the aporias of the Symbolic order are tragedy’s register. The complex relations between presence and absence are the very stuff of both tragedy and deconstruction. Both tragedy and deconstruction put the dominant metaphysics of presence into question to demand other ways of thinking. Time and again, tragedy enacts the impossible decision and the impossibility of the decision for example, foregrounding the breakdown of rationality. We might correlate this madness in reason—and reason’s resistance to its own madness—with tragedy. We might draw an analogy in dramatic style by claiming, paraphrasing Derrida, that, in this mutual rethinking of rationality, “deconstruction is tragedy.”

Without daring to risk a definition of tragedy, there are significant connections between deconstruction and tragedy. Tragedy articulates precarity, the limited horizons of lived experience within a larger order of things, the driven nature of action and identity and the supervention of the Symbolic and the terrifying threat of the Real. Tragedy frequently foregrounds what Judith Butler calls “the grievability of existence”:

Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters (Butler, 2010, pp. 14-15).

Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, “there is a life that will never have been lived,” sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost. The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life. Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start (Butler, 2010, p. 15).

Tragedy, conventionally understood, at the most basic level, is predicated on what Catherine Malabou refers to as “the ontology of the accident,” the accident that is always waiting to happen, the accident as the possibility of both existence and event, the accident as the possibility of radical transformation and ultimately as the guarantor of death (Malabou, 2010). Reversals of fortune are dramatically enacted in tragedy. Catastrophic events—as mostly drastically, perhaps, in the case of Oedipus—constitute massive ontological disturbances. They deconstruct apparently stable identities. They may arise from “grand” events, as in the case of war (*The Persians*), or they may arise in and out of the domestic scene (*Medea*), or both (*Agamemnon*). In the case of Oedipus the catastrophic event has already happened, lurking spectrally in the past to be unveiled in the present and to haunt the future. It is its revelation that is so momentous.

In so far as they indicate that the very order of things is predicated on catastrophe, such events or revelations signify a troubling perspective, an always disturbing possibility that might already have happened. Greek tragedy frequently makes the connection between tragic events and the dangers of overweening certitude or complacent confidence. Staging its lessons in the limits of human knowledge as well as lessons in grief, tragedy frequently represents that favourite Derridean/Freudian affect, mourning, often expressed in extended scenes of lamentation (Carson, 2009). One of the interesting aspects of this emphasis on the

staging of mourning is that it is never quite clear what the precise occasion or object of mourning is. For Oedipus, for example, there are so many things to mourn.

This very darkness of tragedy makes it stirring, compelling. In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) the worldly and apparently materialistic Robert Moore is pressed by Caroline Helstone to read Shakespeare. She recommends *Coriolanus*, perhaps the most Greek of all Shakespeare's tragedies. Robert Moore wonders what is the point: "With a view to making me better? It is to operate like a sermon?" Caroline Helstone's instant reply has nothing to do with any ethic of improvement: "It is to stir you; to give you new sensations. It is to make you feel your life strongly." This exchange neatly encapsulates a view of thinking—exemplified in Attic tragedy—that eschews the homiletic, that is significant primarily for its grave onto-affective force.

Tragedy warns not to overinvest in the apparently lucid medium of rationality. That way hubris lies. Tragedy—not theatre, or misfortune, but the particular, peculiar quality of Attic tragedy—constitutes "a way of thinking" or an "orientation to meaning" at odds with the limited rationalist tendencies that have dominated educational philosophy (Heidegger, 1993a). Tragedy disdains any overarching ethic of redemption. As Catherine Malabou might put it, destructive plasticity as an inescapable dimension of being must recognize that all flourishings and becomings are subject to catastrophic reversal or to termination. If this seems obvious, Malabou (drawing significantly on both Hegel and Heidegger) indicates how the dominant metaphysics of our era has foreclosed the destructive element in plasticity (Malabou, 2010).

We may recall that Plato, after all, envisaged an ideal state that would banish the tragic poets. Their element is hostile to the rationally configured state. Aristotle in turn sought to rethink tragedy as a kind of collective therapy. We might be tempted to think that a certain, dominant, rationalist line of philosophy arises as an antidote to tragedy. And we might be further tempted, with good reason, to consider that the powerfully dominant metaphysics of education that characterizes our time is precisely a foreclosure of tragedy. It is without doubt that the dominant heritage of the philosophy of education is characterized by its vapid rationalism, its dedication to a "conceptual analysis" in the service of the essential good that education "is," and without a second thought, decided to be (Hirst and Peter, 1970).

\* \* \*

The final lines of *Oedipus Tyrannus* come from the chorus:

People of Thebes, our native land,  
look on this man, this Oedipus, the one  
who understood that celebrated riddle.



He was the most powerful of men.  
Everyone envied this man's wealth.  
Look at the surging tide of terrible disaster that overwhelms him.

As we live on in wait for our final day,  
let no man be called happy  
Until he carries his happiness  
down to the grave in peace.

This extraordinary statement echoes the wisdom of Silenus, cited by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a quintessentially nihilistic piece of "common wisdom":

Suffering creature, born for a day, child of accident and toil, why are you forcing me to say what would give you the greatest pleasure not to hear? The very best thing for you is totally unreachable: not to have been born, not to exist, to be nothing. The second best thing for you, however, is this—to die soon.

The wisdom of Silenus prompts Nietzsche to ask:

Is pessimism inevitably a sign of decadence, warp, weakened instincts, as it was once with the ancient Hindus, as it is now with us modern Europeans? Or is there such a thing as a strong pessimism? A penchant of the mind for what is hard, terrible, evil, dubious in existence, arising from a plethora of health, plenitude of being? Could it be, perhaps, that the very feeling of superabundance created its own kind of suffering: a temerity of penetration, hankering for the enemy (the worth-while enemy) so as to prove its strength, to experience at last what it means to fear something?

Nietzsche sets the Dionysian—as a way of thinking and orientation to being—against what he sees as the limiting strictures of Socratic morality and dialectic, "the satisfaction and serenity of the theoretical man."

Could not this very Socratic way be a sign of collapse, exhaustion, sickness, and the dissolution of the anarchic instinct? And could the "Greek serenity" of later Greek periods be only a red sunset?

Nietzsche affirms the necessity of tragedy as antidote to the wisdom of Silenus. Deception and positive illusion are expressions of the will to live in the face of its dark "strong pessimism." According to Nietzsche's account of Greek spiritual

history, Socrates appears to define philosophy as a colder will to truth. Tragedy belongs to the projected world of the symbolic, the domain that celebrates its own doubleness, in its encounter with the formless and terrifying Real. Carrying this idea forward, we might suggest that tragedy may offer a kind of “pharmakon” (remedy or “poison that cures”) against the strictures of instrumental rationality that dominate modernity and beyond. A possible escape from the catastrophic nihilism that characterizes “technological enframing” where the essence of technology—itsself a kind of positive fabrication of truth—is negated in the pursuit of resource in an equation of being with productivity and investment value (Derrida, 1981; Heidegger, 1993a).

### **Philosophy and Education**

How does the tragic way of thinking stand with the nature and legacy of philosophy? Or at least, the hegemonic interpretation of philosophy in the field of education? Philosophy as the rationalization of what education is and does, philosophy as the champion of education as the rationalization of the meaning of life? Within the ontotheological horizon of the philosophy of education, philosophy appears as the means for the analysis of concepts, a supplementary discourse in the service of the rationalization of education from curriculum to pedagogy. The history of philosophy of education can be seen as the progress of this rationalization towards the realization of education as equivalent to being itself. Within this history the social sphere and the sphere of the self are understood as subject to the endless labour of improvement towards the ultimate redemption offered by educational theology. The ontotheological dimension of education inhabits both an instrumental perspective—whereby education is aligned with economic flourishing, social management, maximizing of human resources—and a more liberal notion of education as a meaningful, endless end in itself. In both cases, the apparatuses of education ensure that these perspectives are co-opted for a specific relation to a determinate “future” as opposed to a more open “avenir” (Dick & Kofman, 2002).

A good deal of philosophy of education has acted as advocate for education in general or advocate for a specific modality or aspect of education. Much philosophy of education (and powerful theories of education in general) has been strongly configured in a redemptive mode. Here a significant mythology prevails, a mythology that represents its mission as the liberation of education from its disciplinary/ governmental, fallen self. Moreover the salvation of the field of the social is envisioned through the ministrations of a liberated education that is proper to itself. This is the mythology of the “true” education, education “proper” delivered from the institutional confines that have become the “technological enframing” of modernity (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 2011).

This is the dual mission of education studies in general. In this general way of thinking there is a strong correlation of education with the human that the philosophy of education has been eager to espouse:

The question as to what it means to be human is also and perhaps even first of all, an educational question. Education, be it the education of children, the education of adults, or the education of other “newcomers,” is after all always an intervention into someone’s life—an intervention motivated by the idea that it will make this life somehow better: more complete, more rounded, more perfect—and maybe even more human (Biesta, 2006, p. 2).

Ought we not to be chilled by this evocation of the distinction between the human and the “more human,” a distinction that is predicated on the idea of education as a necessary, even essential component of “what it means to be human.” This logic, distinguishing the human from the less human, the more perfect from the less has a bad historical profile. Its apparently everyday humanism is not so innocent as might first appear and certainly is not as innocent as it wants to believe itself to be. And yet it seems like an everyday truism.

Innumerable examples can be found of this account of philosophy’s relation to education. All indicate a strongly embedded, quintessential series of ideas, practices and orientation. This ontotheological commitment to education as proper to human being has become so strongly interwoven with an institutional form of existence that it has become indistinguishable from itself. Education and our way of life have become both metaphysically and materially intertwined, so much so that the pairing of education as salvation and philosophy of education as its advocate can no longer see itself as a distinct entity with any outside. That’s just the way it is (Agamben, 2013).

The myth of education pervades both the mainstream and the progressive. Both strive for recognition as the one true spirit of education in an era where education is seen increasingly as the essence of progress and salvation, as providing the best hope for the “restoration” of a public democratic space, redemption from the inequalities that make the world a shameful home for the comfortable and redemption from the depredations of overweening human activity, ecology crisis or “technological enframing” (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 2011).

The myth of education as the cure for all ills at the social and personal and now international or global level persists against all the evidence to the contrary, including the global dominance of privileged institutions, the homogenizing of curricula, the persistent enactment of blatant inequalities founded in deep-seated, institutionalized cultural biases, the intensification of regimes dedicated to the

promotion of normativity from cradle to grave and the intensification of the “iron cage” of instrumental rationality.

An important symptom of the myth of education is exemplified in the fact that Foucault’s “biopower” perspective, although long available, rarely organizes thinking in mainstream educational studies, even those studies that invoke Foucault to sharpen their allegedly critical edge and to offer to rethink educational policy (Ball, 2013). The radical edge of the biopolitical concept of discipline as critique of the pastoral institutions of modernity is too dangerous for contemporary accounts of schooling, especially for school reform advocates and the improvement discourses they espouse but also for reformers with more lofty aspirations to liberate education from its fallen institutionalized self (Foucault, 1977; 2007). This includes so-called “critical education studies” (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 2011).

Foucault meticulously demonstrates features of the “great transformation” that determine the very topography of the school as government. “Discipline” involves the enclosure, separation and coding of spaces, the production of choreographed “tableaux vivants,” the “microphysics” of “cellular power” that are all dedicated to the transformation of time reconstituted as a moral, economic, governmental dimension of being. The “dangerous multitudes” and “unregulated time” of modern urban spaces get transformed under disciplinary time in managed spaces dedicated to carefully articulated activities. Increasingly subtle mechanisms of self-government are enabled within the technologies of the self, developed by the institution (Foucault, 1995, pp. 195-22). Within the disciplinary regime of the school, age-stratification accompanies an organized social stratification that gradually comes to be based on the dangerously misplaced idea of meritocracy. Norms of development that become increasingly refined and specific justify distinctions of attainment that in turn become predictions of social economic status. Within highly codified institutional contexts, a thoroughly normative model of knowledge prevails. A sovereignty of normativity reigns. It naturalizes inequality and ultimately, as Biesta alarmingly and unknowingly demonstrates above, comes to delimit the very notion of the human.

Biopower operates through discipline but also through control and ideally through self-governing forms of control. In our time, life itself increasingly comes to be seen as an educational project within the ubiquitous logic of biopower. The self always stands in a condition of deficit, subject to the remorseless logic of inspection and improvement. Self-critical consciousness and “the examined life” are celebrated as opening the possibility of interminable education. The school becomes the paradigm institution of modernity. Its logic reaches beyond the specific age of schooling into “lifelong learning,” it reaches beyond the specific space of the school into social life in general.

This force of an enclosure without limits can be seen in relation to Agamben’s analogy of the contemporary political order with the paradigm space of “the camp”

(Agamben, 1998). For all its acquired subtleties in techniques of the self (and techniques of the collective, too), schooling still operates under the compulsion of the law. In Europe schooling is *de facto* obligatory. In many countries all alternatives to the school itself are foreclosed, as “home-schooling” is illegal.

The school, for all its utterly mundane, normal and dispersed ubiquity, is a highly exceptional space, juridically speaking. Much of its internal practice is immune to the law. Decisive decisions that the institution makes in terms of identity and social trajectory are beyond the adjudication of any court of appeal. There is no recourse to extra-institutional authority to challenge life-changing determinations and distribution of social identities. Schools operate a crucial form of symbolic violence as well as depending, ultimately, for their authority on the machinery of state violence, albeit ever more restrained and refined, ever more withdrawn as the ethic of education prevails ever more insistently.

Schooling is essential to government although rarely represented as the very essence of contemporary government. The constituency of the school is not free to determine its own relation to time and space: and is far from free in a number of ways. Schooling operates in contexts of confinement, the restriction of association and the strict organization of time and space. Perhaps one of the most interesting features of the school “dislocating localization” is its reterritorialized ubiquity, its non-special enclosure of space as a series of “zones of indistinction” or as “hybrid space of exception” (Agamben, 1997, p. 113).

In the nation state of modernity, schooling has also been configured typically as an agent for national belonging and national cohesion, from Empire day to more recent and more subtle attempts to organize collective culture and the ongoing governance of language. This cultural governance parallels the “government of the soul,” the dimension of schooling concerned with inculcating deep-seated modes of conduct and orientations towards the self as self-managed project (Rose, 1990). And, of course, in their usually strict hierarchy of authority schools model a specific organization of power in the name of institutionalized authority. Such power is naturalized as is the strange power of separation that operates through the school. The deterritorialized governmental force of the school operates also as a dimension of security: in Hannah Arendt’s phrase “to protect the child from society and to protect society from the child.”

The school can also be related analogically to the camp in so far as its inmates have a special, non-citizen (or not-yet citizen) legal status conferred upon them. This circular logic of identity pertains to childhood in modernity (Agamben, 1998). The analogy with the camp that Agamben’s thinking prompts is a structural, figural matter. I am not here claiming to draw a direct parallel between the experience of schooling and the experience of the camp, of course. Some of the parallels are important, though, in the rarely adumbrated ontology of the paradigm institution of modernity, the school. The camp, like the modern school, is a European invention,

has colonial origins, and has been concerned with displaced national security. According to Agamben, the camp constitutes the “fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the west” (Agamben, 1997, p. 181). The same claim can be made for the school. The school as fundamental institution of governance has been exported increasingly, often in explicitly violent form (Harber, 2004). Agamben claims, again inviting a direct parallel with the school, that the camp is “an event which decisively signals the political space of modernity itself” (Agamben, 1997, p. 113). The camp according to Agamben is “the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living” (Agamben, 1997, p. 106). The school is not hidden except in terms of enjoying a mythical identity and status essentially at odds with its governmental instantiation.

The contemporary form of schooling is not at all accidental: it is fundamental. It is constitutionally, “genetically” at odds with democratic order. Its mode of pastoral discipline works within a feudal hierarchy of being. To imagine that this school can be refunctioned to serve the liberal dream of equality or to become a vehicle for democracy is to fail to understand the role schooling plays in the social division of labour as well as to fail to understand its essential mode of operation, its governmental function. The governmental mode of schooling extends beyond the specific institution. Universities and other institutions of global, western education share its essential governmental characteristics and features. This analysis is rarely taken seriously by advocates for reform and redemption. It threatens the very existence of academic discourses of education that remain strongly predicated on a misplaced ethic of improvement or an unaccountable faith in reform (Peim & Flint, 2009).

All the essential features of the contemporary world of education are incompatible with the ethic of tragedy. Submission to the myth of education, to education as ontotheological principle is also a submission to an invasive instrumental rationality that promotes predictable futures, restrictions of identity and that constrains possibilities for being by its determinate impositions. It is not enough, I believe, to claim that “the arts of self” can redeem us from this force without calling into question the entirety of the apparatus (Ball, 2013). We may ponder that to accept this ordered and hierarchical vision at least suppresses those elements of being that may involve risk, disorder that we might ultimately refer to as “the Dionysian.”

### **Tragedy, Modernity and Beyond**

To revisit the relations between philosophy and tragedy—following Nietzsche and the disturbance that Nietzsche’s thinking entails—offers one way to approach the mono view of philosophy in its relations to education. Consider, for example, the relation between truth and fiction, where, apparently, philosophy seeks truth and tragedy operates in the register of fiction. This is the rationale for Plato’s desire to

banish the tragic poets from the polis. This Platonic divide, however, between truth and fiction, is untenable. The desire to make the separation is founded in the project that seeks to determine the ultimate, ontotheological, determination of truth. To paraphrase Nietzsche, the characteristic form of rationality that is claimed for philosophy, in the names, especially, of Socrates, Plato and Euripides, represents a bloodless, analytic, school-based, abstracted idea of what thinking is. In the emergence of the great phases of Greek philosophy, tragedy is displaced, rendered impossible, in fact, by a new hegemony of metaphysics that is represented by a cool, essentially Platonic rationality, where philosophy seeks to settle truth and the route to truth and tragedy operates, ostensibly, often outrageously, in the register of fiction.

This difference is very significant. Consider Foucault's problematization of the relations between truth, fiction, history, politics and "conjunction" in the famous passage from a late interview.

I am fully aware that I have never written anything other than fictions. For all that, I would not want to say that they were outside the truth. It seems plausible to me to make fictions work within truth...and in some way to make discourse arouse, "fabricate," something which does not yet exist, thus to fiction something. One "fictions" history starting from a political reality that renders it true, one "fictions" a politics not yet in existence starting from a historical truth. (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

Foucault indicates the essential relation between these categories implying a fundamentally productive, and Nietzschean, orientation towards truth.

For Nietzsche it seems that what Foucault sometimes refers to as "fictioning" (the production of knowledge) has a significant collective, affective component. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche decries the drastic role of Euripides in undermining the essential quality of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche reminds us that Attic tragedy is both strongly emotive, staging affects and posing questions in a mood that reflects fundamental, metaphysical anxieties. Both affective and metaphysical dimensions are entwined in Attic tragedy in what is a *political* (for the "polis") spectacle. In tragedy, metaphysics, politics and affect are not separated. According to Nietzsche's breath-taking semi-mythical account, Euripides, inspired by Socrates, brought drama into the classroom, subjecting it to a remorseless analytical scrutiny. In this movement, so claims Nietzsche, Greek tragedy loses both its supreme confidence and its "strong pessimism." It gets exposed to the platonic critique that opposes its mode of operation to the proper, analytical pursuit of truth. The movement from collective myth to rationally scrutinized interrogation signals, for Nietzsche, a loss of confidence and purpose in the movement of Greek consciousness.

In an obvious sense tragedy operates in a specific “mood,” to borrow Heidegger’s important term. Tragedy stages grief, especially grief arising from war (Carson, 2009). The lamentation of mourning is frequently its register, frequently invoking the wisdom of Silenus as its motto as in the final choral speech of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It seems obvious that this register is essentially at odds with the prevailing ethic of contemporary, global education. Education has been beset by a “will-to-knowledge” represented by vulgar notions of the progress of science and by a certain foreclosure of the complex relations between science, knowledge and what Heidegger refers to as “technological enframing” (Heidegger, 1993a). Within a certain ethic, science operates twenty years shy of a complete, unified theory of everything. Cosmology, neuroscience, genetics and now epigenetics are, so the claim goes, on the verge of a complete understanding of fundamentals of “being-in-the-world.” Recently, for example, Sir Paul Nurse as President of the Royal Society lamented in a BBC documentary that modern science was self-evidently only a force for right and good but just needs better public relations (Nurse, 2011). In another popular example, Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, gives an awestruck account of science in modernity (2004). The text confidently presents science as a progressive, teleological narrative, even though the end of the book considers the fragility of life and worries about its capacity to withstand possible ecological and cosmological futures. For Bryson, science holds out the best hope for any kind of future. It doesn’t seem excessive to claim that *A Short History...* is representative of a dominant strand of Western metaphysics that takes science as knowledge itself and that sees science as being concerned with (“nearly”) everything.” This idea that science is the future in every meaningful sense is surely the product of the dominance of thinking by the myth of education. This is not to denigrate science but to question the rationalist ontotheological commitment that runs parallel with contemporary faith in education.

Naïve faith that education is an unquestionable good-in-itself and that the pursuit of knowledge can cure all ills besets contemporary thinking, including almost all that takes place under the name of “philosophy of education” even where such practices are patently not philosophical but ontotheological. Such ontotheology signifies a failure to understand the question concerning science, technology and all forms of codified knowledge, in effect, raised by Heidegger in *What is Metaphysics?* (1993b) and again in *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger, 1993a) as well as by key modern theorists of science (Kuhn, 1962; Feyerabend, 2010). These key statements properly remind us that all those things that we pursue with cool rationality are always already invested with both metaphysics and carry affective valency. That does not make them meaningless or inferior. But it does call into question the strongly embedded idea that they are an instrumental rationality embedded in education and its proliferating institutions can redeem the world. Tragedy often declares not only how little we know, but also



frequently problematizes our confidence in the knowledge that we do have. Tragedy invites us to see ourselves differently in relation to our ancient heritage especially in our relation to the symbolic order, the legacy that it is ours to oversee. It invites us to see this inheritance as a kind of enclosure, a restriction on our possibilities, but also, at the same time, as the very grounds of what possibilities we might have.

Plato's desire to expel the tragic poets from the Republic appears as an attempt to banish the emotive medium of tragedy as what threatens to sully the clarity of thought. Tragedy is agonistic, mobilizes the techniques of sophistry, stages argument and counter argument. Tragedy can only claim a space in the republic's vision of the polis if it can demonstrate that, like philosophy, it can "calm down" and be subjected to Aristotle's abstracted poetics, philosophy's triumph over tragedy. But we should be suspicious of this separation of philosophy from tragedy and of the attempt to render tragedy—a "hot" medium—into the cool rationality of one particular modality of philosophy. Tragedy frequently problematizes the cool and rational search for truth, putting the affective, agonistic into play as essential, driving components. Tragedy acknowledges that techniques of sophistry are mobilized in discourse, staging arguments and counter arguments that are always strongly positioned and rooted in specific metaphysics.

When the question of tragedy arises in philosophy in modernity with Nietzsche and with Heidegger, but also emphatically with Freud and Lacan, the register of tragedy returns to philosophy. The question of a relation to tragedy—or at least to the problematizations that tragedy brings with it—becomes "fundamental" to the project of philosophy. In the legacy of Aristotle, Hegel and Rousseau, philosophy seeks to explain and ultimately to rationalize and domesticate the meaning of tragic experience. Tragedy is conceived of as a cleansing agent, a kind of emotional balm, offering a therapeutic engagement with the dubious and problematic that will ultimately give rise to engagement with the clear realm of rational thought proper. An alternative strain arises in Schelling and Schopenhauer culminating in Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1950) tragedy gets mobilized as critique of what philosophy has become—a critique that is amplified in Heidegger. Through Freud (as Wittgenstein noted) and Lacan in psychoanalysis identity and being itself are reconfigured as tragic with their own problematizations of the possibility of philosophy as rational schema inhabiting purely rational space (Wittgenstein, 1970; Lacan, 1966).

Philosophy breaks away from its disciplinary bounds and returns differently to another heritage. In this alternative strand, tragedy comes especially to be strongly associated with politics. Walter Benjamin's early interest in tragedy clearly carries over in the apocalyptic vision of history and politics that found echoes and amplifications in events and thought that followed. The twentieth century's legacy of thought was darkly informed by such disturbing events and by Benjamin's essentially tragic vision of history (Benjamin, 1999). A strand of thinking arises that

redefines the subject of tragedy for modernity. That subject is neither the rational essential human being nor the individual tragic hero. For modernity, Attic Greek tragedy appears to be especially germane in so far as we can say that the subject of tragedy is “the city” or to put it another way, “mitsein,” or the very possibility of being together. If the spectacle of the city is a significant focus in Greek tragedy, the city signifies the condition of mitsein, being-with—collective and political relations within and between peoples posing again the question: who are we? What are the possible and appropriate forms of mitsein given the ongoing disturbances of modernity (Agamben, 1993; Heidegger, 1962; Nancy, 1991)? There is no *dasein* without mitsein. Tragedy problematizes the provenance of the individual subject. At the same time, tragedy stages the difficulty of politics in union with the psychic, mythic dimension, the dimension of collective investment of meaning in common symbolic order that necessarily gets fractured by the differences that “being-with” entails.

An interesting dimension of Attic tragedy for contemporary consciousness is its strangeness. Attic tragedy often appears as mysteriously elliptical. The material it deals with we might say demands this thought-provoking ellipsis: but it provokes also because it operates in Brechtian rather than naturalistic mode. It belongs to this mode because it belongs to an order of thinking we are not automatically tuned in to. One function of tragedy is to “make strange” (*verfremdung*) central questions about identity, history, loyalty, faith and the meaning of our various attachments to things and others. This has important ramifications for how we understand our own relations to the various forms that nihilism takes in modernity and beyond.

Taking the elliptical dimension of tragedy into account we might say tragedy is Lacanian in that it frequently plays on the interplay between Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, the indeterminate spaces of Lacanian ontology. Tragedy foregrounds the role of the Symbolic in its disturbing difference from the Real. Tragedy is founded in this difference (or difference) and can be thought of as the very medium of difference and aporia. In tragedy action is predicated on undecidability and the madness of decision. Tragedy renders action both undecidable and “mad” but always outside the cool calculations of reason. In tragedy the drive is foregrounded while any reason for action is permeated with the desire born of the difference between the symbolic and the real. Tragedy foregrounds the unreason of decision, the tragedy of responsibility in staging the condition of undecidability that attends action. The provenance of the aporetic qualifies the overweening, ego-bound claims of reason. As such, tragedy expresses an essential condition of collective life, of the life of the city (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1990). This staging of a crisis of the very possibility of confidence is itself the expression of an ontological confidence. Tragedy problematizes any simple, ontotheological relation to our prized rationality whether it be individual or collective hence its frequent representation of madness as being the essential companion of reason.

Tragedy represents a challenge to much of what works in the name of philosophy and much of what philosophy has attempted to distil. The process of distillation may leave behind the more grainy textures of existence. Maybe, in fact, tragedy is the name for the experience of lived aporia and radical finitude beset by desire and power.

The founding project of the philosophy of education involved the clarification, through conceptual analysis, of the fundamental categories that were understood to be proper to education. The official organs of the philosophy of education have recently celebrated that heritage enacting a “festschrift” culture that looks like the negation of philosophy and certainly of thinking. The philosophy of education remains addicted to its various kinds of rationalist modalities seeking to clarify conceptual issues and to tidy up confusions, seeking to enable a rationality that is deemed to be proper to education to steer a course along the steady path of enlightenment and improvement. If this is an essentially unphilosophical project, as I have argued, it is because, in its presiding and hegemonic form, philosophy of education is never, and never can be, ontological. It can never ask questions about its own provenance, questions about the fundamental ontology of its avowed subject matter. It can never engage with the questions that must disturb its own sovereignty. It cannot allow for the provenance of the aporetic. It can never willingly abandon its own ontotheological addiction to itself. It can never acknowledge its foundations in a project that is inimical to the spirit of tragedy, a project that avoids the confrontation with nihilism in its embrace of the ontotheological principle of education.

If Nietzsche’s philosophy asked a question of how we live with “the nothing” beginning with an intoxicated celebration of Greek tragedy it certainly did not finally answer that question. Nietzsche tended to represent nihilism as a threat. But Nietzsche also welcomed the crisis that the coming of nihilism brought with it. More recent thinkers have turned again to nihilism as a kind of necessary condition of thinking and as essential to any thinking beyond the more enclosed dimensions of the heritage of metaphysics. In *The Banalization of Nihilism* (1992) Karen Carr’s subtle and extensive account suggests that a kind of nihilism is the only possibility for beginning to rethink possibilities of being outside of theism and ontotheology. She proposes an array of nihilisms that arose in the twentieth century as positive grounds for thinking or rethinking our metaphysical inheritance and possibilities. And of course recently Ray Brasier has suggested the necessity of nihilism: nihilism as the truth of reality and philosophy as “the organon of extinction.” There is perhaps a deeper heritage of the thinking of nihilism in the philosophical tradition in Spinoza’s *Ethics* where the animated drive of “conatus”—equivalent perhaps to Freud’s “eros”—expresses itself in a context where “...all final causes are nothing but human fictions” and where God is without will or entelechy and in the end turns out to be equivalent to Freud’s “thanatos.” This nihilism returns in Heidegger’s

unavoidable “nothing” and in Derrida’s omni-“present” disturbance of being-as-presence in the affirmation of difference and spacing. These modes of thinking represent indispensable challenges to philosophy, to education and to the philosophy of education as we know it.

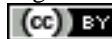
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